

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

A service of remembering and thanksgiving
4 November 2012, All Saints Day
Rev. Anneke Oppewal,
Genesis 23: 1-5, Mark 6: 27-33



“Grief support”

The passages we’ve read this morning are both, in their own ways, concerned with grief and the loss of a loved one. Abraham, in our first passage, is mourning his wife of many, many years, Sarah. And in the second passage we hear about Jesus, losing his cousin, friend, forerunner and colleague John the Baptist. Both Abraham and Jesus suffer devastating losses, and scripture tells us how they each, in their own way, deal with their loss and grief.

Abraham and Sarah have spent a life time together. A life full of upheaval and challenges, with some extraordinary ups and downs, highs and lows. I think we can all imagine what losing his companion of so many years would have meant to Abraham.

Jesus loses a cousin and a friend he most probably grew up with. In the first chapters of the gospel of Luke we are told their mothers were very close, and legend has it that John was doing cartwheels in his mother’s womb when Mary came to see her after she found herself pregnant with Jesus. As grown-ups, John and Jesus both are called to ministry. Their messages and focus are very much alike. Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, with John honouring Jesus with words of respect and awe, and Jesus honouring John by accepting his baptism and his message as the starting point for his own.

Two great losses. Two people devastated by the loss of a partner, a family member, a friend, a colleague. Two giants of faith suffering loss and bereavement.

How they respond to their loss is similar and different.

Abraham we are told, goes in, sits down and weeps. And I think it is important to notice how Abraham’s grief temporarily slows down the story, even bringing it close to a halt. In the middle of an active, fast moving life, we find him going in, entering into his grief.

The words suggest Abraham could not have entered into his grief, but rather stayed outside it. Some of us may recognise this, that moment, or there may even be a whole sequence of moments, where, after we lost someone we loved, we enter into our grief. Where we make room for it and stop trying to deny or ignore it but give in to the need to do what Abraham does: turn inwards, sit down, and weep. In our culture that usually happens after all the fuss around the funeral has died down and we find ourselves on our own confronted with our grief in all its stark, dark, nakedness. But even then we may find there is a choice, to enter into it, or to put it off, turn away from it, drown ourselves in something else. In our culture, that kind of behaviour after bereavement is accepted and at times even encouraged as “getting on with it”, or “being brave”.

Abraham, in a different time and a different culture, attends to his grief immediately after his loss, even before he attends to the funeral. With him we find none of the ‘stiff upper lip’ and ‘please God let me stay in control’ our society’s approach to grieving is riddled with. Abraham enters into his grief, sits down and weeps. Not just a few tears bravely wiped

away in passing, but breaking down in floods of tears and sitting himself down to give his grief the space it needs.

Modern theories of grief tell us this is a very healthy attitude to grief. Healthier by far than what we have been brought up with and what society around us endorses as “brave” and supports with drugs and cheerful denial of significant pain and suffering we all live to deal with at one point in time or another.

Only when he’s done crying does Abraham get up to get the funeral under way. First thing he needs is a grave. Being a migrant he doesn’t own any land. A significant issue which reminded me of conversations we, at home, have had about what we would do ‘if’ one of us would meet with an untimely death. Especially after we first arrived in this country. Abraham is a migrant, he doesn’t have a home, he doesn’t have roots, but he needs a place to bury Sarah, a place that will remain accessible, a place he can come back to, a place to remember her, a place to honour her, a place where he can lay her to rest while his restless existence continues.

He turns to his neighbours. And finds their response surprisingly and refreshingly positive. ‘Any piece of land you’d like Abraham, just tell us, and no need to pay for it either’. There is no haggling about the price, or discussion about land value, there is generosity and support. It is gratefully accepted by Abraham who pays the value put on it without comment. Abraham the foreigner, Abraham the wanderer without house or home finds a supportive community around him in his time of need. Generous, caring, looking after him, even where he is not part of the tribe.

I’ve been involved in too many funerals to know how fundamental this is. And you may have experienced yourself what difference even the smallest gesture, even the smallest act of generosity can make in times of grief and bereavement. Others responding to your need with care can make all the difference.

We find Jesus in a totally different position when the news of John’s death is conveyed to him. While the burial is taken care of by John’s disciples, Jesus receives the message about his gruesome death in the middle of a busy time of ministry, working overtime preaching, teaching and healing those who’ve been gathering around him.

Here as well though, the story slows down considerably after the news is received. Jesus retires, with his close friends, to the desert. Traditionally a place for prayer, and reflection, a place where God is considered to be close. Jesus retiring to the desert suggests withdrawal from the day to day events. Jesus, like Abraham, withdraws, enters into his grief, and makes space for it. His work is put on hold, his ministry is temporarily interrupted, as he sits down, with friends, to attend to his need.

What happens next is remarkable: again we find community gathering, but in a different way. Not to support, but to be supported. We see Jesus coming out of his “desert” time with renewed vigour, focus and strength. The meal where John’s body was broken and his blood spilt, the meal where John’s head was served on a platter is put into contrast with another meal, with another king presiding over it. A meal where the torah as well as the name of Jesus Christ, Son of God is hidden in the very foods that are eaten, 5 pieces of bread and two pieces of fish and five loaves (see sermon 31 July 2011).

Some say the five loaves point towards the Torah, the five books of Moses. Fish, the symbol of early Christianity, is an acronym for the name and titles of Jesus.

Jesus Christos theos uios soter, Jesus Christ Son of God, saviour.

Where those two elements come together, the books of Moses and the Christ, miracles start to happen, wilderness changes to green pasture and people find sustenance they did not know could be provided.

Jesus, after he has taken time out to recover from his grief, contrasts the terrible violence of Herod's table with a different community and a different celebration.

Instead of violence and cruel senseless death, Jesus shares and cares for all who gather and offers abundance and peace in the middle of the desert of life.

And again we may recognise this. How, when we mourn a loved one the sharing of food, the getting together over a cuppa will often help counter the despair and devastation we may feel. How finding ourselves in a caring and sharing community will make all the difference to our loss.

To that very human need and practice Jesus adds another dimension when he invites people to gather around his table, where he breaks the bread and distributes the wine. When we join that community we find ourselves not in just any community, sharing just any meal, but we find ourselves in the company of he who knows suffering and death most intimately. He who knows what comfort and support we need. And he who is able to give it because he himself has lived through the worst of it.

Abraham and Jesus both model an attitude to grief and bereavement that takes time and makes room for sadness, for tears, for turning in and tending to whatever needs to be tended to. Both emerge from their time of grieving strong and focussed, translating their grief into positive action. Both find support through the gathering of community and friends around them. By the end of the story both are ready to move on, with hope and new life on the horizon. But where Abraham accepts the natural death of old age of his wife Sarah, Jesus resists the violent, senseless, killing of John the Baptist by playing out the contrasting reality of the Kingdom of God. A meal of sharing and comfort his followers celebrate to the present day, as we will, here this morning. Amen.